

Breathing Spring

It has been a joyous few days. One of the joys was the annual grouse survey I conduct along the Mud Lake road on the Chippewa National Forest. These surveys are run in the spring, during the height of ruffed grouse drumming. They are roadside counts run annually during standardized time periods and conditions. The counts serve as an index to changes in Minnesota's breeding grouse population. First established in 1949, these routes have been conducted by Minnesota DNR and their cooperators for over 60 years.

The Chippewa National Forest has large amounts of grouse habitat. Timber harvesting which favors young, dense aspen-birch forests has led to high population levels of ruffed grouse. There are currently about 250,000 acres of this kind of habitat on Forest Service lands within the Chippewa National Forest. Grouse are but one species of the wildlife you will see on the Chippewa.

Our surveys this year are a little delayed in comparison to many years, due to the late nature of the spring. The snow was on quite late, and many of the roads we conduct the surveys on were not yet open when the time to begin surveying came. But the snow finally went, and you could say that spring has sprung. The phenology could be described as compressed, with everything coming at once. At the same time as the leaves are coming onto the aspen, I see green needles on many of the tamarack. It's as if all the trees were sitting there, just waiting for their chance to respond to the warmth of the sun, but unable to do so until the snow melted and let the ground warm up. Now there is a burst of color in the woods! There is as much variation in color in the spring woods as there is in fall, with many shades of green (birch, quaking aspen, and much more), red (maples), and even white (young big-toothed aspen).

The leaves were delayed, and yet the angle of the sun and the hours of daylight are what they are, so many of our summer birds are arriving while there is still some visibility in the woods. It won't last long, but right now although the bugs are also coming out, they are not yet to any level of miserability. So my grouse survey was particularly delightful, with much to see, and no suffering on my part as I stood quietly at each stop. I made a few remarks on my data sheet, along with counting the number of drums I heard during each 4 minute survey period. I thought you might be interested in what a person can see for an hour and a half in the early morning on the Chippewa.

The warblers are coming back in droves. On the route I could hear black-and white warblers (squeaky wheel), chestnut-sided warblers (please please pleased to meet'cha), and the bee-bz-bz-bz call of golden-winged warblers. Every now and then, a flash of yellow would come from a yellow warbler. Golden-winged warblers inhabit wet habitats, especially our lowland shrub swamps. The Chippewa is one of the wettest National forests in the country, which adds considerably to the diversity of our bird life.

The road I was surveying from runs through a particularly wet part of the Forest. This brought a smile to my face, because not only could I stand and listen for grouse, but I could hear and sometimes see any number of waterfowl. There are at least 2 pairs of trumpeter swans nesting on the beaver ponds and waterfowl impoundments along my route. I can tell you that there are

numerous pied-billed grebes and a few American bitterns (“slough pumper”) in these wetlands, and at least one pair of sandhill cranes. Lots of ducks and geese are on the scene. Conditions were such that a snipe was displaying near the western end of the route. I couldn’t see him diving from the sky in his aerial mating display, but I could hear him.

Over the sound of the chorus frogs – the ones that sound like a finger being run across a comb – I counted the total number of drums heard at each 4 minute stop. Male ruffed grouse drum in order to advertise their location to potential mates. The grouse drums on a display site, such as a log, in an activity center he defends from other males. Leaning back on his tail, the grouse beats his wings, which creates a vacuum. It is this vacuum that produces the drumming sound; akin to how a lightning flash in the sky produces thunder. The sound of a drum generally carries about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile through the woods.

At one stop along the route there was a very large black bear, ambling along the road and into the woods. A few miles away, a young fawn, still wobbly on its legs, was confused as to which way to go. I parked the truck a while, and waited to be sure the fawn ended up bedded down on dry ground, and not in the adjacent water. He looked to me to be too fresh to be able to get himself out of trouble.

Of course, there was no camera in my pocket on this morning, so I did not capture any of it in a photo. So I shall share a picture from another of my joys of the past few days. Having spent the winter with a barn mostly full of boats and machinery and sadly devoid of life, I have recently brought sheep back to our little farm on the Chippewa. A small handful of a breed of hair sheep known as Katahdins have made their way to my pasture. From a flock of 200, my lambs are as yet a little on the wild side, but I have penned them tight and I have a secret weapon. All sheep, it seems, are partial to oats... even the kind of sheep without wool. Properly armed, on just their second morning at my place these babies are coming to me with some degree of eagerness. And my barn is no longer silent. Even the cat has moved back in.

My husband, the owner of the boat needing some sort of winter cover, seems to be handling the change with some degree of grace. I thought I heard him say, “it’s good to have some edibles in the barn”. He claims he said, “it’s good to have some animals in the barn”. Whatever. What he appears to be mostly is relieved they are sheep, and not goats. I have been thinking about goats ever since I got out of sheep last fall, and despite my best efforts, somehow my spouse has heard that goats have a bad reputation for not honoring fences. It is said that their victory dance of freedom includes romping all over your vehicles.



He also mentioned there is something of a resemblance, at least at a distance, between my new sheep and deer. That might pose a concern this fall during deer season. I’m beginning to

think about the need to make a few signs. Perhaps a cutout the shape of a sheep, with a message alerting folks not to shoot Kelly's Katahdins!

Whatever brings joy to your life, make a little time for it and breathe in the spring.

by Kelly Barrett, Wildlife Biologist
Chippewa National Forest